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IMAGINING ANTI-ADMINISTRATION'S ANTI-HERO (ANTAGONIST? PROTAGONIST? AGONIST?)

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ABSTRACT

This article poses an anti-heroic creature of folklore and administrative experience as a potential personification of anti-administration. In these pages, the paradoxical and antagonistic figure of Trickster is offered in comparison and contrast to some protagonists and agonistic "heroes" of contemporary administrative theory. It is suggested that antagonism has imaginative and anti-administrative uses.

How then, can a people interested in finding truth, in totalizing the universe, be brought to respect a figure who laughs at their enterprise? (Lundquist, 1991, p. 89)

PROLOGUE

When you and I imagine David Farmer's "anti-administration" personified, we may imagine uniquely. For myself, I imagine neither administrators, nor any kinds of hero. Nor do I imagine negative characters, conspiring against administrative good with administrative evil. Instead, I imagine paradoxical figures who laugh at the administrative enterprise, play with our most cherished projects, and yet concoct something clever for use.

I try to imagine what anti-administrative figures, once embodied, might teach us, and which of our administrative weaknesses and uncertainties they might exploit. In tolerant moments, I picture their creativity, and the small-t truths and changes they might make possible. But then I am struck by how irritating such characters are, and imagine administrators concocting systems to defend themselves against these embodiments of desire, disorder, disruption, and disobedience. In a fit of sympathy, I understand why administrators play against, rather than with, their energies. But at other times, I laugh at their capers and ironies, much as the masters of anti-administration might laugh at me. If the truth is to be told, I laugh especially hard when such

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characters suffer for their own indefinability and foolishness, and get caught in their own inventions. Who are *they* to mess with the best-laid plans?

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Perhaps you imagine some other character starring in the "play" of anti-administration. And perhaps you think I take "anti-administration" and its ironic, playful, and radically anti-bureaucratic stance too far. But hear me out! Picture an anti-heroic character emerging from the pages and voices of existing literary and cultural repertoires. In a word, summon the "trickster...."

(...Enter Trickster)

Appearing in English for the first time in 1868, the word "trickster" captured the notion of the prankster and culture-hero who embodied both sacred and profane (Christen, 1998; Landay, 1998). But long before the term was coined among the English-speaking, narratives and folktales of such trickster characters appeared around the globe. Depending on one's cultural affinities, and probably also one's gender, Trickster is Loki, Uncle, Raven, Coyote, Reynard, Hermes, Mercury, Prometheus, Catwoman, or the storyteller, Scheherezade.[1] For those who lived though the American sixties, Trickster is the late and sometimes great Abbie Hoffman; warts and all, he is my vision of anti-administration personified.

Obviously, the anti-administrative figure I have called to mind is a creature of folklore, and an aggravation of epic proportions. But I want to suggest s/he is also a creature of our administrative experience, and one from whom we might gain. In this manuscript the trickster is posed one potential embodiment of anti-administration, one type of anti-hero,[2] if you will. In these pages, s/he is offered in comparison and contrast to Grecian formula "heroes," both protagonist and agonist, of contemporary administrative theory.

From here on, I shall write of them—of Trickster, and Hero, and Agonist—and not much more of me.

ACT ONE: TRICKSTER AND HERO, PROTAGONISTS

[W]hoever does not fear isolation can overthrow the order of things.
(Noelle-Neumann, 1993, p. 140)

Trickster is the folk figure who engages in pranks and parody, and crosses all sorts of boundaries and lines. When a trickster is on the scene, prevailing rules are thwarted, uncertainties are incarnated, imagination is embraced, conflicts are sidestepped, and paradoxes are transformed. Neither saints nor devils, neither good citizens nor psychopaths, tricksters disturb fixed

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categories and modes of thinking, and get folks "unstuck" from usual routines. Though others audition, tricksters star in anti-administrative roles.

In a classic treatment, Hynes weighs in on the characteristics of the trickster. Stressing six characteristics as a "cluster of manifest trickster traits" but not a theory, definition, or "essence" (Hynes, 1993, pp. 34, 27), Hynes elaborates the "trickster Gestalt" (Hynes & Doty, 1993, p. 9): trickster is a cultural manifestation of the ambiguous and anomalous, of that which is neither one pole of Levi-Strauss' binary nor the other, nor both at once; trickster is a deceiver and player of tricks, the cause of disorder and the victim of his own overreaching; trickster is a "shape shifter" who alters and disguises himself, to enter forbidden spaces and signify impermanence; trickster is a situation inverter, turning the world upside down and inside out in irreverence, jest, and parody; trickster is messenger to and imitator of the gods, crossing the boundaries of heaven and earth, life and death, enduring the punishments of the exalted for breaking taboo; trickster is sacred and lewd, profaning this, to bring us that (Hynes, 1993, pp. 34–37).

Tricksters are creatures of appetite—libido is the engine driving the story along. While tricksters may be "understood as the embodiment of such productive chaos as creativity, play, spontaneity, inventiveness, ingenuity, and adventure" (Hynes, 1993, p. 210), they are also out-cast, undisciplined, ironic, and anything but heroic....

(...Enter Hero)

> *Hero: ...He may be cross-eyed, wide-eared, thick-necked, bandy-legged—what you please; but he must have a more or less protruding jaw. (Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 1911, as cited in Kramarae & Treichler, 1992, p. 189)*

If we need "heroes" to look up to in public administration, and many an author suggests we do, the trickster tale does not seem the place to seek them (for critical reviews of the hero genre in public administration, see Terry, 1991; Stivers, 1993). To be sure, it is hard to look up to tricksters. Though sophisticates may find this a laughable hierarchical yearning to begin with, its satisfaction seems quite essential to the manufacture of heroes (Stivers, 1993, p. 96). Whether to our relief or to our dismay, the Trickster does nothing to "resuscitate the idea of public virtue to defend administrative authority" (Stivers, 1993, p. 99), except perhaps to underline our longing for it (on such longings, see Gusfield, 1981).

Nonetheless, the trickster figure is sometimes described as a particular kind of "hero." For instance, Joseph Campbell, the *sine qua non* of heroic mythology, makes no distinction between tricksters and heroes as protagonists (1971; 1975).[3] But ultimately, Western associations with these terms do not square up. Trickster is by no means the moral exemplar a hero moniker requires, even accounting for Hero's tragic flaws. Arguably, there are key

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differences between heroes and tricksters, in flaws, in appetite and discipline, and in comic versus tragic successes and failures. (Trickster freely admits he would rather eat a gyro than be one, his chin dripping with too much juice for us to determine if it is heroically square).

Both Terry and Stivers are right to suggest that we face up to both the negative and the positive aspects of the symbols we use (Terry, 1991; Stivers, 1993, p. 93). So, it must be admitted that tricksters, in many respects, are far worse than heroes. As Stivers indicates, the U.S. "hero factory" honors men whose famed physical exploits and social muscle render their private experiences, particularly with women, both exploitable and invisible sources of power. The trickster figure surely carries many of these cultural liabilities as well. "Private" appetite drives Trickster, and s/he is as likely to take advantage of another's appetite as to satisfy her/his own. If it is kvetchy to admit one is aggravated by heroism, antagonism is undeniable with Trickster.

At the same time, however, Trickster has an anti-fascist energy; by pure contrarity, s/he articulates the limits of discipline. As Stivers has put it, there is much to be gained by "refusing to get it right," by remaining flexible and open to struggle, tentative, curious, and skeptical about "grand designs" (1996, p. 268). An example is provided in the African American tradition of the trickster. In the words of noted folklorist, Daryl Dance: "Unlike the standard Western hero, who is usually a defender of the system, he sees the system as his enemy" (Dance, 1978, p. 180). Folklore tells us how people perceive themselves and their world, shows, for instance, how the Black Hero can "outsmart the Man" to force his recognition and respect (Dance, 1978, p. xx). He bucks the system, which does not have his interests at heart in any case.[4]

Perhaps then, what redeems the trickster figure is an agonic, or even antagonistic, stance toward conventional heroes. Trickster reminds us perfect discipline is deadening, and lampoons the glorious plastic of the pulseless action hero.

ACT TWO: TRICKSTER AND HERO GO TO GREECE

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous force (sic) are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man. (Joseph Campbell, 1949/1975, p. 31).

Readers familiar with recent work in public administration theory no doubt intuit resonance between the trickster dynamics I have discussed thus far, and the tensions of agonic conflict, as registered in contemporary administrative theory. Though I will ultimately argue that it requires a very different crayon to outline Trickster's lusty and perpetual spirited contrariness, a common assertion lies underneath the notions of Agonist and Trickster. There is an unspoken assertion of some life force, creative spirit, Bergsonian *elan vital*

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(Maritain, 1968) or Nietzchian human will that simply must be heard or felt.[5] But is Agonist's game more like Hero's, or Trickster's? Is it more administrative, or anti-administrative?

The *agon* is the etymological and intellectual origin of PA's references to "agonistic striving" and argumentation, agonistic spirit, and "agonistic discourse." Such references often arrive via interpretations of Habermas or Arendt. As registered by Fox and Miller (1996), King (2000), and others, the *agon*, a Greek space of physical competition, is variously elaborated in political terms. However, there is some dispute as to the nature of both the Greek agon, and Habermas' and Arendt's intentions in respect to it. The common denominator appears to be a sense in which the Agonists, those who participate in the agon's athletic contests, constitute a metaphor for the conflict inherent in the political realm. Beyond that, readings differ radically, and this subject bears a brief venture, for reasons I hope to make clear.

The notion of the Greek agonistic competition as a mock war positioned well within the status quo is certainly a prevalent interpretation. For instance, Habermas's model of the public sphere laments that Greek model in this way: "The conduct of the citizen was *agonistic* [italics added] merely in the sportive competition with each other that was a mock war against the external enemy and not in dispute with his own government" (Landes, 1995, p. 95, citing Habermas, 1993, p. 52). For Habermas, the public sphere is to engage in challenge and critique instead.

In introducing the term, agon, to public administration, Fox and Miller present it in this Habermasian light (but not only this light). At least as deployed by these discourse theorists, agonistic tension is thoroughly associated with energetic "argumentation, claiming, and counterclaiming" (Fox & Miller, 1996, p. 11). In part, agonism is public competition, but note that it is an engagement in opposition that is developmental in some "heroic" way (Fox & Miller, 1996, p. 119). In other words, the agon is a model for the sport of politics, for a *polis* (w)ringing with the agonistic perspirations of its heroes.

Despite all the exertion, there is precious little mention of pain in the agon. It is a characteristic of the heroic world that it is "a world of action more than of sensation," less to be lived in than looked back upon (Miller, 1997, pp. 143, 146). While the Greek inspired Agonists capture conflict rather well, these colorings and shadings also capture a type of affectless, rationalist, and heroic warriorship. Whoever is debating and being debated within it, the agon is associated with "moral and political greatness, heroism and preeminence," all "revealed, displayed, and shared with others" in an elite quest for "recognition, precedence and acclaim" (Behhabib, 1998, p. 69). When transported to the public sphere, the polis as agon seems to describe a place where "the dominating, controlling and aggressive tendencies of humans are defined as the most valuable parts of their being" (King, 2000, p. 275). Unfortunately, this agonistic *polis* was (and in my estimation, remains) a

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space made possible only "because large groups of human beings like women, slaves, labourers, non-citizen residents, and all non-Greeks were excluded from it," though of course their labor was its foundation (Benhabib, 1998, p. 67). In view of such severe limitations, agonistic space is an enticing target for feminist critique. For instance, such a model of the public realm is fruitfully contrasted to its presumed opposite, an "associational" public sphere where political actors act in concert (Benhabib, 1998; King, 2000).

Fortunately, other interpretations of the same texts offer a different rendering of the agon. Honig (1993; 1998) embraces the term *agon* for its possibilities in capturing the notion that "politically engaged individuals act *and* struggle both with *and* against each other" (1998, p. 121). In Honig's reading, (Arendt's) agonism is not mere "boyish posturing" (1998, p. 121), but a concept that captures both struggle *and* association in the same intellectual container. Much like a trickster tale, Honig's brilliant, but idiosyncratic, rendering of agon (and *virtu*) is posed in unruly terms. In her analysis it is in the agon that one contests cultivation of a virtue that is a fortress, its lines keeping it uncrossably apart from the world, rigid, and unable to adapt (Honig, 1993, p. 68).

To some extent, public administration's proponents of the agon can be interpreted to agree with Honig's rendering, as well as with the classical one. For instance, in their introduction of *agon* to public administration's vocabulary, Fox and Miller cite Honig's reading of the term. Then, after invoking the historically boyish image of the muscle, they offer a brief but parallel signification for agon: "there is an irreducible otherness, opposition, or tension implied in agon...held in check by centripetal commitment to common engagement," they say (Fox & Miller, 1996, p. 119).

Either representation of the agon, it seems to me, is more concerned with Hero's opponents and victories than with remainders and innovations. In the prevailing view, the undisputed homogeneity of the agonal contestants suggests what Turner would call a twinned competition (1969/1977; 1987), not a contest of binaries or differences. With a twinned competition, we can have it both ways—yes, the agon is a space of elite heroic warriorship; yes, these agonists struggle both with and against self and other. But Hero and Agonist are doppelgangers. Honig's idiosyncratic vision aside, it is Hero the Protagonist, and Agonist, his twin brother, that we find grappling in the agonistic polis. In flashing back to Greece, we'll find them to this very day. Not content to be remaindered, Trickster has run away, no doubt with the women.

ACT THREE: FROM AGON TO ANTI-ADMIN

To affirm the perpetuity of contest is not to celebrate a world without points of stabilization; it is to affirm the reality of perpetual contest,

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> *even within an ordered setting, and to identify the affirmative dimensions of contestation. (Honig, 1993, p. 15)*

Heretical though it may be to say so, by Act Three it does not seem particularly important what was meant by *agon* in ancient Greece. We need not be "enthralled with" antiquity any more than with modernity (Adams, 1994). Nor does it particularly matter exactly what Habermas and Arendt meant to say at the time. Language shifts, words move, and we are not faithful to the Founders. My point in taking Act Two's detour was not to decide who shows more fidelity to the Greeks, nor whose reading or reassessment of Arendt should win that agonal competition. What seems to matter is the term in use, the meanings public administration has made of the metaphor. And, returning from our adventure in Greece, the point is to examine Agonist's relation and resonance with Hero, with Trickster, and with anti-administration.

All in all, the metaphors of Hero and Agonist, in current use, seem more limited and limiting than that of Trickster, at least when it comes to anti-administration. Though certainly more interesting than the square jawed Buzz Lightyear Hero, and perhaps less mighty and self-involved than the Hero of Great Tragedy, the Agonist contestants yet seem another species of the hero.

Agonist has more in common with Hero than with an anti-heroic or anti-administrative energy. Whatever their other virtues, agonistic competitions seem very ordered ones—agonism still implies a disciplined and choreographed contest in a preconstructed arena. Though its embrace of conflict, tension, and energy is refreshing to import into a public administration inclined to prefer a stifling functionalism, the metaphor of the agon seems in no way an image of spontaneity, creativity, or disorder.

While the activities of the agon are certainly not POSDCORB, it seems very unlikely that iconoclastic possibilities will enter, from the margins or anywhere else. The agon's heroic competitors are chosen from already honored and demonstrated excellences. Agonic contest does not appear to be against the status quo, and does not appear to break up hegemony or even hegemonic appearances. At its political limits, the metaphor of the agon seems to speak more of the trickeries of those in the center than the cleverness of Hyde's (1998) rake at the boundaries. In a phrase, its uses seem more administrative than anti-administrative.

Another way to contrast agonistic and trickster dynamics is to recognize how Trickster, often in allegorical animal form, uses indirection and persuasion (Dance, 1978, p. 181). He uses wile and scheming, to overcome his own powerlessness and lack of weaponry. He is no Olympian, but rather, "unsportsmanlike" (Dance, 1978, p. 181), often outwitting Massa, the fox, in a conflict to satisfy his appetites. This he may do, even to retain independent pursuit of his own bad qualities! In trickster tales, these dynamics often are expressed through sexual superiority, and though such imageries are contorted historically through lenses of racial anxiety, the very point is their earthiness.

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Such themes of appetite and guile do not resonate with choreographed competitions of Greek virtue. It is his cleverness, and not his goodness, his cunning and not his excellence on the job that gives Trickster mastery. Moreover, when he loses it is not always to a worthy opponent.[6]

Though Honig's treatment of the agon is a compelling defense of what she has called "the remainders" of society and politics, the questions of appetite and survival Trickster might raise are defined out of, or at least held at arm's length from, the "authentically political" agonistic public sphere (See Arendt herself; see Stivers, on Arendt, 1999, p. 7). The metaphor of the agonistic polis, though powerful, also lends itself to disembodied argument. The argument, though situated, is lofty, verbal, glorious, and ordered; the aim is to win. Then, whether defeated or victorious, the heroic corps(e) is orderly, beautiful, and quite still.

The limit of the agon metaphor, in my estimation, is precisely in the necessity of one person, energy, pole or idea, to win, whatever Honig's hopes in borrowing this language. Whether dualities of similars or opposites are involved, agonal conflict pursues a victory (achieved or backed by force) and an end to the tension. The anti-administrative power of the trickster metaphor, however, is in the tension itself, in evocation of symbols of "tensed unity or Gestalt, whose tension is constituted by ineradicable forces or realities...whose nature as a unit is constituted and bounded by the very forces that contend within it" (Turner, 1969, p. 83). The metaphor of the anti-administrative trickster is also a bit different than the dialectic. "Mutually involved irrepressibles" belong in tension; they do not seek resolution (Turner, 1969, p. 83). Though Trickster may concoct something new or make use of the play of forces, s/he does not resolve, reconcile, or blend the disorder as much as reside in it. No "boon" is guaranteed. S/he "refuses to get it right" (Stivers, 1996).

EPILOGUE

> *The impact of irony is then to hold up that which is taken for granted, familiar, and commonplace as something strange and problematic. If phenomena are made into topics of analysis the audience may be moved into a new perspective toward them... The debunking, unmasking criticism of the sociologist is crucial to the unleashing of imagination. (Gusfield, 1981, p. 191)*

While the trickster is a cultural and not an individual psychological figure, a figure grown in cultural soil, s/he is the cultural embodiment of that which will not fit, sit or stay. More than mere naysaying, Trickster's variant of the life force is linked to notions of creativity. Trickster figures often embody the idea that we can develop alternative constructs, rather than choose merely among existing ones (Hynes, 1993, pp. 211–212). Thus, Trickster is a cultural

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expression of open-endedness rather than stagnation; of many options, not just twins in contest; of creativity rather than determination.[7]

Yet nothing in the trickster repertoire necessarily flies in the face of conventional social research. While the Asch experiments on perceptions of line length are much noted for their revelations about conformity, they also reveal something about singularity. Though the majority exerts extraordinary influence, the experiments also show that the presence of a single non-conformist, an innovator perhaps, reduces conformity among others. Such a deviant may not make the change he or she intends, but if persistent and consistent, and creative rather than inflexible, one dissenter can set new effects in motion. One dissenter can become the confederate who lends courage to another, or can merely be the target for ridicule that makes yet another's dissent seem tame enough to reveal. One dissenter, however lusty or ridiculous, shows it is possible to differ, shows it is possible that the situation, rather than a personal shortcoming, is in need of repair (Baron et al., 1991, p. 457; Patterson, 2000; Scott, 1990). Change becomes thinkable again.

"Anti-administration" seems to me to be a position of playful, even mischievous, dissent, well personified by the trickster folk figure (see Farmer, 1997, on play). Anti-administration seems to contend, as many feminisms do, that the prevailing questions do not make sense. Our schooling experiences teach us that authority figures put propositions forward in the form of questions that can and should be answered within the supplied frame (Lewis, 1993, p. 168). Feminists maintain that our inquiries need to be re-framed, our questions re-posed, and not just adequate or new answers given to the same old questions. The same might be said of the trickster in public administration. For instance, to questions of efficiency so dominant in public organizations today, questions to which it is *au courant* to supply private sector answers, Trickster might well respond with insolence. Or, Trickster might demonstrate a greed that will satisfy her and teach the rest of us a hard lesson.

Whatever the question or answer, Trickster will pose a laughing challenge to the culture of public administration. Though often unpleasant and by itself insufficient, it seems exactly the sort of troublemaking "anti-administration" summons to mind. Anti-administration insists it is reasonable to ask the anti-fascist question: "What would the administrative world look like if there were a moral imperative to be anti-institutional?" (Farmer, 1995, p. 243). It suggests that the character of the services agencies provide would be modified by questions posed in playful and unpermitted, rather than merely destructive or easily deflected, terms.

The creative Trickster is, embodies, and enacts a world of fluid themes, many of them disruptive, derisive, disagreeable, and negatively socially sanctioned. If the reader is a bit confused, it is all to the good. In Turner's terms, this "multivocality" enriches and deepens the value of a symbol (1969). In turn, it enhances the relevance to public administration of this ambiguous

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figure—at once psychological archetype, anthropological concept, collective production, and anti-administrative literary trope.

ENDNOTES

1. For a more in-depth consideration of the characteristics, gender, and relevance of the trickster figure, see Patterson, 2001.

2. Gary Marshall is presently working on a manuscript featuring other types of anti-hero, and I thank him for letting me borrow his vocabulary for my purposes here.

3. Interestingly, some, though not most, of the problems Terry identifies might be ameliorated by distinguishing heroes and tricksters.

4. At this point, I feel it is wise to interrogate the term, "enemy," given the Oklahoma City bombing, and other results of seeing government in the terms of "war." In view of such tragedy, I want to stress that the trickster figure is a symbolic creature of mischief, not a literal form of malice. S/he is an anti-administrative question, not an anti-government answer. S/he is a symbolic force of irony, and perhaps creative destruction, but not a terrorist.

5. This is an optimistic but troublesome essentialist notion that I cannot defend philosophically, but treat as a visible *a priori*. (Honig appears to do likewise (1993)). At this moment, I must leave it to others to plumb the depths of such questions.

6. Trickster figures, like heroes and agonists, are often, but not always male. See endnote 1.

7. But *cf.* Papanikolas (1995), whose thesis suggests that those who turn to myth rather than to history actually prefer stasis to change. He seems to take the nihilistic position that we need tricksters to swindle us out of self created utopian austerities, to which, in turn, the creative (and only) alternative is false optimism.

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